

Paris: Still Doing It De Gaulle's Way

Fourth of a Series

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Washington Post Foreign Service

PARIS—French intelligence services have routinely undertaken covert operations in foreign countries, been involved in the assassination of opponents and conducted internal spying on political dissidents since World War II, according to published accounts of former French operatives and to interviews with French and foreign experts on the intelligence community here.

Many of the French exploits have become well-known through leaks to the press and through highly partisan accounts written by disgruntled agents hoping to clear their own names or to turn a profit with a sensationalized best seller.

But there has been nothing comparable here to the U.S. Senate's attempt to delineate publicly the political responsibility for the kinds of sins laid at the door of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

There have been internal housecleanings at lower levels after some of the more spectacular French failures, but they have been carried out quietly, if at times brutally, and always with the top figures of the regime carefully insulated from the repercussions.

An important layer of the insulation consists of the multiplicity of French intelligence operations. At least four different groups in France carry out the kinds of operations that have brought the CIA and FBI under sharp criticism in the United States.

The proliferation grew up under Gen. Charles de Gaulle, who encouraged security services that "paralleled" government agencies and were loyal only to him and not to the formal bureaucracy. Faced at different times with serious threats of civil war

Other Cloaks, Other Daggers---IV

from both left and right, De Gaulle did not want a concentration of power in any one security service. Yet he was not one to pay attention to the details of the daily operation of government.

In wartime De Gaulle's followers got into the habit of not placing too fine a point on the legal niceties. The Free French movement based in London was constantly on the lookout for double agents slipping across the English

Channel from Nazi-occupied France to join the Gaullist resistance movement. A number of bodies of presumed double agents were dug up at one point from the cellar of a London building used by the Free French. In the interest of allied unity, the scandal of unofficial French justice having been meted out on British soil was hushed up.

Even after the war, at least some of the Gaullist operatives seemed to have maintained the attitude that they were outside the law, and Gen. de Gaulle did little to disabuse them of that notion.

De Gaulle's successors, the late Georges Pompidou and France's current president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, moved to centralize important intelligence functions. Giscard has sharply curtailed the freewheeling activities of fringe operatives who mixed intelligence with drug smuggling, vice and gangland rivalries.

Under Giscard, the 2,000-man French equivalent of the CIA, the service of external documentation and counterespionage, whose French acronym is SDECE, has become more professionalized and is cooperating more closely with the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies than under De Gaulle.

The French services are also putting more of their resources into straight commercial and economic espionage and monitoring of Communist country communications and movements, and sharply deemphasizing their once paramount political role in former French colonies in Africa, according to French and diplomatic sources.

"Under Giscard, there is a much more realistic approach to what a small service can do, and a much more hardheaded economic approach to what French interests abroad are," says one foreign expert. "The days of intervening directly in Africa for sentiment or the glory of France seem to be over."

But Africa and compartmentalization are still important elements of French covert operations.

SDECE, with Giscard's evident approval, is now cooperating, for example, with the CIA and Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko by channeling arms and money to Holden Roberto's National Front for the Liberation of Angola, according to French, African and diplomatic sources.

French support without any official government imprimatur is also going directly to the much smaller liberation front for the Cabinda enclave, known as FLEC, based in Gabon. The support, said to consist of money, arms and the promise to recruit mercenaries, is widely believed here to be directed by Jacques Foccart, once De Gaulle's chief operative on Africa and the reputed boss of France's dirty tricks sector under both De Gaulle and Pompidou.

The two largely independent operations represent more than the kind of routine covering of bets that intelligence services often make.

SDECE's interests in Angola seem to be largely strategic, although there is a healthy dose of economic self-interest involved. The French share American concern about the spread of Communism and Soviet influence in Africa, and are interested in building their influence in Zaire and maintaining it in South Africa, which is also helping the National Front and its ally UNITA.

Foccart's operation is believed, however, to have major commercial implications. Largely financed by the sizable private treasury Foccart can put together from French

Gabon, with an eye on Cabinda's oil reserves, or with outstanding political or other debts for Foccart's help during the De Gaulle and Pompidou days. It is a graphic demonstration of the personalization of power by the Gaullists outside the channels of government.

Foccart, 61, was elbowed out of his job as presidential adviser shortly after Giscard was elected in 1974 and now runs a large export-import company here. His network of informants and operatives is still largely intact, although diplomats report that the apparatus no longer receives any substantial amount of government money.

The post-World War II history of France's intelligence services has been stained by repeated scandal, internal intrigue and cooperation with criminal elements that makes the known CIA links to the Mafia look small. But no political body here has had the independence or strength to run a full-scale inquiry similar to the Senate intelligence committee's report on the CIA.

Such a body would also have extreme difficulty in coming up with documents or witnesses. Foccart carted off several truckloads of documents after the deaths of De Gaulle and Pompidou and some of the key figures in scandals brought to public light have died violent deaths.

The four major French intelligence services are:

1.—SDECE founded after World War II with help from American intelligence, the service is known as the "swimming pool" by the French because of the proximity of its headquarters to the Tourelles swimming pool on the outskirts of Paris.

The service is formally part of the ministry of defense but has a direct line of communication to the presidency through one of Giscard's advisers and coordinates closely with Giscard's interior minister, Michel Poniatowski. Like De Gaulle's interior ministers, Poniatowski is probably the key man in intelligence policy decisions.

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